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Mother Says Downey Is Hopeful China Will Set Him Free Soon



United Press International

Mrs. Mary V. Downey, left, and Mrs. William Downey
in Hong Kong after visit to John Downey in prison.

Special to The New York Times

HONG KONG, Nov. 15 — The

mother of an American held captive in China for 19 years said today he believes chances are good that he will be released and not have to serve out his life sentence.

Mrs. Mary V. Downey, of New Britain, Conn., who is 70 years old, reported this after a two-week visit to China. During her stay Mrs. Downey met eight times with her son, John Thomas Downey, who is imprisoned in Peking.

Mr. Downey, a civilian employee of the United States Army, was aboard a plane that took off from South Korea in 1952, during the Korean war, and disappeared.

The Defense Department said the plane had been on a flight to Japan but Peking accused Mr. Downey of espionage and having been connected to a spy network in China, and sentenced him to life imprisonment.

Diplomatic sources said that on the basis of Mrs. Downey's report it now seemed likely that Mr. Downey, 41, and Richard G. Fecteau, 44, who had been on the plane with Mr. Downey, would soon be released. Mr. Fecteau, who is from Lynn, Mass. and was also a civilian employee of the Army, was given a 20-year sentence and would be due for release next year.

The sources said that release of the Americans was the type of goodwill gesture that might be expected from China to set

the stage for the President Nixon's planned visit to China after the first of the year.

The sources said they hoped that China might also release two other imprisoned American Air Force pilots, Capt. Philip E. Smith, 37, and Lieut. Robert J. Flynn, 33, forced down after having strayed over China during missions in North Vietnam.

Mrs. Downey, accompanied to China by a son, William Downey, a New York lawyer, and his wife, said they had been permitted to visit once with Mr. Fecteau and that they had found him "in excellent health and fine spirits." She said she had also found Mr. Downey in that condition.

Mrs. Downey stated, "At the end of our visit, Jack told us that he had been informed by the prison authorities that his case was being reviewed to determine whether, under their policy of leniency, he might be released rather than serve out his life sentence."

She continued: "The prison officials told Jack that an important factor in deciding whether to apply leniency was the prisoner's behavior while in prison, and that they considered that his behavior had been good."

"We have no assurance that Jack will be released, nor, if so, when. But Jack said that he did not think that the prison officials would tell him about this possibility, and have him in turn tell it to us, unless the chances were good."

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